

Theodora Dimova

Lecture written for the SOZOPOL FICTION SEMINARS

21-24 May, 2008

Before I start I would like to express my gratitude to Elizabeth Kostova for what she is doing for Bulgarian literature. Establishing a foundation to support creative writing is unprecedented in our country's recent history. With this gesture of respect toward literature, Elizabeth honors the country as a whole and especially Bulgarian writers. Elizabeth is reminding us that despite a country's size and the size of its language, literature is a reality of a different kind, a country of the spirit with no borders and with a completely different set of rules.

As writers, we inhabit this hyper-reality and live according to its laws. Now isn't the time to discuss whether a life in literature is a comfortable experience or not, what it gives and takes from us, what sacrifices it demands, whether it makes us happier or more miserable, or whether we can enter and exit it as we choose. These are questions we can each answer according to our own worldviews. I personally believe that there are more cheerful ways of spending your life than being a writer, because in the end our job is to look at the darker, more sinful side of the world. Perhaps we will have a chance to discuss these questions informally later today and tomorrow; in fact, I have no doubt that we will. However, for the time being, I would like to concentrate on writing itself and specifically on the questions of how a book comes to be, what the writing process entails and what nourishes us as writers.

Coming up with rules about writing is not an easy task. Personally, I don't believe that you can learn creative writing from any one else or teach it. But I do believe that talking and listening to others talk about the writing process and the pitfalls, breakdowns, depression and despair that necessarily accompany it can provide young writers with the courage, strength and resilience that the profession demands.

I'll begin by saying that each of my novels and plays have come into being in a completely different way. Even for the same writer, it's difficult to say what generates the desire to create a work. I often compare writing to love, a sort of love at first sight. If we are able to discover the source of our feelings for someone, we will be able to analyze the source of our desire to write something, even if we have no idea what it will turn out to be. You know you want to write it, but you don't know what it is.

It's like falling in love - on the one hand, you know nothing about the person, yet on the other you feel like you know everything, as if you've known him forever. It is on this very thin and delicate ice - which could crack at any moment - that

the imperative to write is born. The urge to write is so intense and overwhelming that you sometimes feel you could reach out and touch it. We all are familiar with this absolute necessity to write! If it's not there, I never sit down to write. If the impulse is less than fierce and unquenchable, writing becomes a chore, a burden. Yes, the desire to write! You follow it like a blind man, not knowing where you're headed, sensing it only by smell, by sound, by a voice, a word, a phrase, a situation. You feel your way around, and you wake up at night... from the pressure that's building up inside you, pushing you down an unfamiliar, unseen path. You could fall into a trap or an abyss at any moment, anything could happen, but you walk on, you give in, you surrender to the desire. It is a mystery, a secret, we shouldn't try to analyze it too much lest it push us away. That's what conceiving a novel is like - the darkest, most dangerous and intuitive stage of the writing process.

I started out writing plays. My first novel, *Emine*, came out eight years ago. Until then, I'd never thought I would write novels. Fiction had seemed beyond reach. I can now confidently say that that plays are the most difficult genre to write, but I didn't know that then. *Emine's* story was a simple, clear, chronological and - in my opinion - theatrical idea and I wanted to make a play out of it.

The most important thing for any genre, whether play or novel, is being able to find a structure, a skeleton for your story, the principle of the narrative. Once grasped, if only intuitively, the structure or skeleton will begin working of its own accord, as if propelled by an internal engine. The structure itself will sort through the material, deciding what to keep and what to get rid of; in some paradoxical way it is working in place of the author, taking priority over the author in the writing process. The structure becomes the master and you the apprentice, whose role is to tirelessly serve your master, constantly providing him with the necessary material. For this reason I can never start writing if I don't have at least a rough, intuitive idea of the structure.

So I had *Emine's* story - a striking story - and I felt the absolute necessity to tell it. I also had a vague idea about the structure of my play. So I began. I felt that this time everything would run smoothly and there wouldn't be much to agonize over, to search for, to discover. In a year and a half of almost daily writing I'd completed a mere three scenes, a total of no more than 10 pages. And the three scenes didn't even fit together, not even with the most creative sequencing. They didn't even have the same characters. It was painfully clear that I wasn't going to be able to write this play, that I couldn't find the structure. I told myself not to worry; obviously, not everything works out the way we want it to. Just relax - so you won't write *Emine's* story, but you'll write some other play, some other story. Just put it aside and move on. I walked around Sofia for days and kept repeating these things to myself, until I realized I was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. It wasn't depression, but a very

clear feeling that some of the wiring inside me was about to blow. The truth was that I could *not* write Emine's story. It had possessed me, it was inside me, living some parallel life that I couldn't help but surrender to, yet I couldn't write it. The feeling that you're going crazy. That you don't know when your fuses will blow. That was the first time I realized that writing is a dangerous thing, a very dangerous thing. A thing that should be approached very cautiously. To be a writer, you must have something strong and resilient inside you to withstand the stories that enter you, to help you work them out. If you don't, the stories will consume you, they will rework you.

This state, which lasted about a month, was difficult for me. It was even harder to explain to the people around me, to my family and friends. To a certain extent, it's unsharable - it was a life-or-death battle with an invisible enemy. I knew by then it would be very difficult to free myself from Emine's story. The truth was I had accepted defeat. Defeat was everywhere.

Then one morning I sat down at my desk again and said to myself: I'll just write down everything inside me, without worrying about a structure, chronology, dialogue and scenes. I'll do it for myself, once and for all, so that I can be free of Emine and her story. I began writing 15 to 20 pages a day. I sat and began writing in long breaths, without believing in or understanding what was happening. I wrote the novel in less than a month - followed by a substantial amount of editing, of course. I didn't know whether it was a short story or a novella or what; I had no idea where the novel's structure - that I had been hopelessly searching for in the form of a play for a year and a half - came from. When I finished the novel in a month, I was as happy as I had been miserable before I started it. How it happened is still a mystery to me. Many years have passed since then and I still don't have an explanation as to what blocked my energy in play form (which I knew so well) and what had unleashed the energy in novel form. Not only had I never attempted to write a novel before - I'd been downright scared of it.

I've told you the story of writing *Emine* in detail as a way for us to reflect on the force that exists inside us even before the moment we start writing, a force that gives birth to the writing process and drives the words out of us.

I will now describe how I wrote my second novel, *Mothers*, to encourage reflection on what nourishes literature, what supports it, grounds it. I wrote this novel in a fundamentally different way and for very different reasons, which I will try to explain.

Bulgarian society is going through a cataclysmic period - it is a very sick society. I believe that during such periods writers cannot ignore socially important topics. For me, child aggression, child crime and the general state of children are the scariest and most serious social problems Bulgaria faces. In these

difficult times, I believe that it is a writer's duty to be the link between society and the individual. When someone spends ten leva to buy a book or a theater ticket, the book or the play should help him - in one way or another. They ought to be able to do something specific for the individual: to make him feel less lonely or confused or devoid of values and direction, to fill him with compassion and a sense of community. It's precisely this lack of compassion and communal feeling in our society that nudged me towards writing *Mothers*.

I started writing it after a horrible murder in the spring of 2004, when two fourteen-year-old girls in Plovdiv killed one of their classmates. Other murders committed by teenagers followed in the fall in Pernik, Blagoevgrad and Stara Zagora. These were not ordinary crimes like the ones we are now used to seeing in Hollywood films or in the newspapers. They are a sign that something unprecedented is happening in our society. That we've crossed borders that we shouldn't have crossed. Like the orphanage for abandoned children in the village of Mogilino and the BBC documentary about it. Incidentally, our politicians claimed that Bulgaria has no problems with its orphanages and labeled the film "an aggressive anti-Bulgarian campaign." It is exactly the extreme cynicism of those in power that is ruining the moral fabric of our society. We keep repeating ad nauseum - our society is sick. Societies are living organisms and they can be sick. And this disease affects all of us, no matter how much we try to emigrate into ourselves.

I began writing *Mothers* simply because I wanted to figure out for myself what was going on. I didn't know that my explanation would grow into a novel. And I didn't know that an explosion of child crime was still ahead.

I tried to find the roots of this brutality. I don't know whether I succeeded. However, I am sure of one thing - the kids are not to blame.

The two fourteen-year-old child murderers were born in 1990 - the year we actually gained our freedom from communism. They are the children of the Transition. They grew up while their parents waited all night in lines for milk, cheered at political rallies, protested in demonstrations, tried to live on twenty dollars a month or lost their jobs, emigrated to America and then returned. They had parents who went under, got back on their feet, got rich or got drunk, who lost themselves amidst their money or the lack of it. These kids grew up with parents who felt like condemned sinners who had to pay for who knows whose crimes. These kids grew up around feverish restless red-eyed adults with meaningless lives who never took their eyes off the TV and were quick to pick a fight over politics as soon as they got home from work. If they didn't pick fights about politics, they cursed at it. These kids, the children of the Transition, grew up in the company of adults who grew quieter, gloomier and more sullen by the day. In a few years' time they didn't even want to look at the TV and they didn't bother to curse. Then the kids went to school, where they saw their teachers with their shabby clothes and shattered confidence. And they saw their

classmates with mobile phones worth their teacher's entire annual salary. The kids saw the rich - their houses, their insolence and their self-destruction. And they saw the poor - their wide-open eyes, their helplessness, their suffocation...

I happened to overhear a conversation. "I don't know what else to do for these kids!" a well-off mother of two was complaining to a friend. "They have absolutely no gratitude! I give them ten leva every single day, I take them to the sea during the summer and skiing during the winter... I don't understand what else they could want!" Indeed, what else could a child need but money, skiing and the seaside!

I heard another woman in an ill-fitting faded overcoat exclaim: "If I can't even take care of myself, how can I take care of my children!"

We abandoned our children. We forgot about them, swept up in our own nonsense. We took away the cocoon of love they are supposed to grow up in. And without this protective layer of love and concern, children are exposed like bare nerves.

They soak up our energies. Our energies build up in them. Our discontent. Our dissatisfaction. Our sullenness. Our Balkan bitterness. The aggression we somehow manage to live with.

But they can't. Our kids are not built to cope with this enormous lack - a lack of joy, love, friendship, laughter, goodness and celebration. They don't have the defense mechanisms to compensate. Their isolation is greater than ours. Their ignorance of good and bad is greater. And their silence is scarier.

The truth is that although they were born in the year of freedom, we did not nourish them with freedom. Because communism didn't disappear then. It is still around now - in our inability to love. In our godlessness. In our lack of fire, energy and enthusiasm. Communism lives on in our malice, suspicion and envy. In the poisonous energy that the children of the Transition soaked up from their mothers, fathers, teachers, classmates, computers, TVs and big brothers. Our children are who we are. They are our achievement over the past fifteen years.

Mothers has received numerous awards in Bulgaria and abroad. It has been published in four languages and is being translated into another three. Its Bulgarian sales are unprecedented for a contemporary Bulgarian novel. Yet its success has made me realize how little influence literature has on society. Child crime in Bulgaria not only still exists - it increases with every passing day. The social atmosphere and energy surrounding our children is the same.

Perhaps our only hope - as my colleague Deyan Enev says - is that although literature cannot influence society, it can influence the individual. And that hope is reason enough for us to continue writing.

I will end my lecture with an excerpt from *Mothers* about a writer who is the father of one of my protagonists. Unlike this lecture, it was written spontaneously and thus will give you a clearer idea of my understanding of writing.

Translated by Boris Deliradev

Edited by Angela Rodel